

Film Review: Susanne Bier's Oscar-Winning 'In a Better World'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 15, 2011 - 2:27pm

- [Academy Awards](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Brothers](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [In a Better World](#) [6]
- [Markus Rygaard](#) [7]
- [Mikael Persbrandt](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Susanne Bier](#) [10]
- [Things We Lost in the Fire](#) [11]
- [Trine Dyrholm](#) [12]
- [Ulrich Thomsen](#) [13]
- [William Johnk Nielsen](#) [14]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Susanne Bier's "In a Better World" was a surprising winner at the Academy Awards when Best Foreign Language Film was announced, leading many to wonder what could have beaten the critically-acclaimed "Dogtooth" or "Biutiful," which clearly had a lot of love considering its Best Actor nomination. "In a Better World" must have been pretty great, right? Yes and no. It's a better film than a few of the Academy's recent decisions ("Departures" comes to mind), but also nowhere near as complete a film as a number of alternate choices. This category is still a mess, as proven by the win for this interesting but ultimately a bit too shallow examination of revenge and parenthood.

Don't get me wrong. "In a Better World" is a good film. Bier is a talented director, as proven by the excellent "Brothers" (which was remade with Tobey Maguire and Jake Gyllenhaal) and even the underrated "Things We Lost in the Fire." She has a particular gift with actors, drawing complex, emotional performances from her cast. She does so again here with excellent work from the great Mikael Persbrandt ("Everlasting Moments"), Ulrich Thomsen ("Brothers"), and Trine Dyrholm ("Troubled Water") along with child actors Markus Rygaard and William Johnk Nielsen.



[Read Brian Tallerico's full review of "In a Better World" in our reviews section.](#) [15]

But it's not a great film. The script by Bier and regular collaborator Anders Thomas Jensen is a bit muddled as it tries to draw lines from Africa to London to Sweden to Denmark and gets a bit lost along the way. I've been fascinated by different responses to "In a Better World." A noted critic went as far as to call it repugnant while another thinks it's the best commentary on revenge since "Munich." Neither is true. It's a quality film that somehow still feels more unfocused than it needed to be. I admire it almost purely for its performances and wish the story had the power to match what the actors are bringing to it.

Said story focuses primarily on two children – the headstrong and possibly sociopathic Christian (Nielsen) and the awkward and shy Elias (Rygaard). Christian just lost his mother and he has moved to a small town in Denmark from London with his distant father Claus (Thomsen) after her death. At school, Christian becomes partnered with the bullied Elias, a young man who has clearly taken abuse for some time. Elias' family life has crumbled as his father Anton (Persbrandt) and mother Marianne (Dyrholm) seem on the verge of a divorce and are living apart. Anton spends weeks in Africa serving as a doctor at a Sudanese refugee camp where he sees the kind of true horror most of us cannot even imagine.



[Continue reading for Brian Tallerico's full "In a Better World" review.](#) [15]

"In a Better World" stars Markus Rygaard, William Johnk Nielsen, Mikael Persbrandt, Trine Dyrholm, and Ulrich Thomsen. It was written by Susanne Bier & Anders Thomas Jensen and directed by Bier. It is not rated and opens in Chicago on April 15th, 2011.



In a Better World

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

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- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/brothers>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/in-a-better-world>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/markus-rygaard>
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- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/susanne-bier>
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